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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the impact of a school-based family literacy program located in an urban, working-class Ontario, Canada neighborhood on parents enrolled with their toddlers. Subjects, 15 white female parents between the ages of 17.6 and 33 years who had not completed secondary education, were interviewed, wrote journals, and participated in parent-child literacy and social interaction activities. Results indicated that (1) participation in the family literacy program positively affected the ways in which most of the enrolled parents engaged in shared reading activities at home; and (2) half of the parents continued to be enrolled with plans to complete secondary school. Findings suggest that while the program involved parents in reflection about their parenting styles and that parents appeared to adopt a wider range of parenting styles, there is no evidence that parents continued to use the strategies at home after the program ended. Five tables are included. (Contains 19 references.) (RS)

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Developing Parenting and Literacy Skills Together: Effects on Parents of a High School Family Literacy Program

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Developing Parenting and Literacy Skills Together: Effects on Parents of a High School Family Literacy Program

Research on the critical role of the family in the literacy development and school success of children has led to intervention strategies to develop skills of parents as the first teachers of children (Beals & DeTemple, 1992; Chall & Snow, 1982; Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale, 1984). Interest in family literacy has increased across Canada as well as the United States, as concern about high drop-out rates and unemployment have been linked increasingly to literacy (Darville, 1992; Lancaster, 1992; Thomas, 1989).

Family literacy intervention has been identified as a successful strategy to attract hard to reach teenage parents, as well as immigrant and refuggee parents, in order to support these groups in literacy and educational attainment (Paratore, 1992; Seaman, Popp, & Darling, 1991). In viewing the child and adult caregiver as a learning dyad, the family literacy intervention strategy has been seen to potentially offer twice the literacy effects by combining adult and child in a program (Nickse, 1990; Sticht & McDonald, 1989).

Some of the interest in family literacy may be due to the opportunity it offers adults to engage in literacy activities that are socially and personally meaningful, without the risk of failure (Langer, 1987). This view of family literacy intervention focuses on tasks which complement current adult strengths in caregiving and which serve a useful function in the parenting role. Fear of failure has kept many adults from participating in more traditional literacy programs and has been implicated in the low retention rates of those programs (Kazemek, 1988; Malicky & Norman, 1993).

In reviewing family literacy work with immigrant and refugee families, Auerbach (1989) distinguished a transmission of school practices model and a social-contextual model of family literacy. Alarm generated by a "literacy crisis" contributes to the development of a transmission model in which the goal is strengthening home-school ties through parent instruction. "The model starts with the needs, problems, and practices that educators identify, and then transfers skills or practices to parents in

order to inform their interactions with children; its direction moves from the school/educator to the parents, and then to the children (Auerbach, 1989, p. 169)."

In contrast, the social-contextual model seeks to reaffirm the home culture and personal experiences of the family (Langer,1987). By drawing on parents' knowledge and experience through parent journal writing, photo stories, and collaborative curriculum development, literacy is increasingly viewed by parents as a tool to cope with and control their social environment in order to satisfy family cultural goals rather than goals set by the culture of the school.

The transmission model of family literacy can contain assumptions about parent low literacy and lack of home literacy that may lead to the reemergence of a deficit hypothesis, where the responsibility for literacy problems rests with family inadequacies (Auerbach, 1989). Nevertheless, ethnographic research with low income families (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) indicated that these families have a variety of literacy experiences, although such family literacy practice and beliefs may be incongruent with those which promote school success.

The present investigation was based on a family literacy program for native English speaking families, with a primary stated goal to increase accessibility and opportunity for educational attainment by dropout adults. At the same time program objectives included promoting parent-child literacy related interactions such shared reading and conversation. In addition to parent-child shared reading activities, parents engaged in discussions and written reflection on a variety of parenting issues.

Parenting topics were loosely structured to enable the adults to collaborate with each other and use their personally developed parenting knowledge in a school setting. Research (Moroz & Allen-Meares,1991) has identified that young and poor parents experience multiple stresses around childrearing, and parenting concerns are significant issues in their lives. The family literacy program attempted to connect literacy activities to parenting issues through parent collaborative discussion, observation, and writing about parenting.

There are no current published Canadian data on family literacy related to parent home literacy practice and parent perceptions of emergent literacy as they affect school-based literacy. Although many family literacy programs have been initiated in Canada, with

over fifty programs in Ontario alone, there are no Canadian data on characteristics of families who take advantage of such programs.

PURPOSE

This paper presents findings on the impact of a school based family literacy program on parents enrolled with their toddlers. A goal of the program is to assist parents to incorporate literacy activity in parent problem solving, whereby parent-child literacy interaction becomes an effective parent tool in coping with the responsibilities of parenting. Program data on children in the program will not be presented at this time. This paper will profile background characteristics of parents who participated in the program and attempt to identify family variables associated with successful participation. Criteria for parent success included amount and type of parent-child shared reading, use of literacy based parenting strategies, changes in career and academic planning.

PROGRAM

In 1992 the Family Learning Program began enrolling young, disadvantaged parents and their children in order to provide opportunities for family literacy development and adult educational achievement.

In each of two terms, a daily, half-day program is available for parents who have not completed secondary school, while a play program is provided for their young children, two to four years of age. Parents enroll for two credits in one five month term, which includes two courses - Parenting and Domestic Foods. A family literacy curriculum builds on the pride parents take in their parental role and the parenting knowledge they have developed through experience. Each day follows a fixed schedule which includes "Parent Alone Time" and "Parent and Child Together Time," adapted from a family literacy format developed by the National Center for Family Literacy (Seaman, Popp, & Darling (1991).

The family literacy program is located in an urban, working class neighborhood. Over the last three years the school has become an adult education center, offering upgrading and career

oriented programs. Next year it will no longer accept grade nine students, after decades as a vocational school focused on basic and special education programs.

Recruitment for the program is accomplished through local advertisement, referral from social and health agencies, and word-of-mouth. Most participants (95%) came from the local area, able to walk to the program or use school bus pass service. While the program targeted disadvantaged young parents and their toddlers, admissions criteria include desire to enroll in the family learning program for secondary school credit and willingness to participate in shared literacy activities on a daily basis. Consequently, the program is open to all interested parents with toddlers, who have not completed secondary school, regardless of the level of academic disadvantage or socio-economic status.

The program occupies a large "family" space with couches, work tables, children's toys and books, etc., in addition to a separate children's play room. The program focus is on parent-child literacy and social interaction, rather than adult, individualized literacy skill development. There are no academic pretests at program entry. For the Parenting Course, three days a week, parents engage in parent-child interaction in play and reading, group work, individual journal writing, and practice related to teacher presentation of parent-child reading strategies, children's literature, and parenting topics. The rest of the week includes nutrition and kitchen tasks for a Domestic Foods credit. Parenting assignments include keeping a family scrapbook and a personal journal, sharing children's literature, observing and playing with one's children, creating and using child play activities, and engaging in a series of parent-child reading activities. Parents work together to identify parenting topics, based on a range of topic related reading material and carry out a home-based parent management project.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through parent interviews, parent journals, staff observational records, parent class work. All parents were interviewed at the beginning of the program to obtain background information on parent and child, to record initial parent perceptions of parenting style, concerns, and home literacy activities.

Parents kept journals throughout the program, with weekly notations about personal development, perceptions of child learning and home shared reading, and parenting. With parent permission, the program teacher and the program researcher who attended class on a weekly basis read parent journals throughout the program and on occasion responded with individual comments. From parent journal entries made in the first and last six weeks, incidence judgments were made by teacher and program researcher related to: amount of parent-child shared reading at home, parent perceptions of comfort in parent-child home reading, parenting concerns, parenting strategies used, career planning and goals. Frequency judgements were checked for consistency and there were no disagreements between raters.

Measures of Parent-Child Conversation (five items) and Parent Read Aloud Strategies (five items) were recorded for each parent at the beginning and end of the Program, based on class observations by teacher and program researcher. The Parent-Child Conversation Scale is a three level rating of the extent of parent initiated conversation with the child during play sessions in school. The Parent Read Aloud Strategies scale is a rating of parent use of five common reading strategies taught and practiced in the program.

PARTICIPANTS

Data were obtained for 17 parents enrolled in two classes. While total enrollment was 21, four parents dropped out within the first three weeks. Since two parents dropped out after three months, due to pregnancy, exit data were based on a sample size of 15.

All parents were white females between the ages of 17.6 and 33 years (M Age = 21.5, SD = 5.05). Fourteen parents were single, not previously married, with the majority of these (9) having no male partner in the home. Seven parents were over the age of 20 and three of these parents whose age range was 23 to 33 years were married, with spouses present in the home.

The number of children in a family ranged from one to four (M = 1.55, SD = .83). None of the parents was working, with all of the single parents supporting their families through a variety of social assistance arrangements. The three married parents had support from working spouses. Spousal employment was of a permanent nature including maintainance, mechanic, and draftsman work.

At the time of entry into the program, almost half (8) of the parents had childcare arrangements. This was dependent on the age of the child, with all of these families having children over age three in some type of morning nursery school program. All of these nursery programs were subsidized. Of the three married parents, two cited cost as the reason they did not place their children in nursery programs, while one parent considered her two year old too young for daycare.

Of the ten single parents under 20 years of age, the majority (8) hoped to have additional children in the near future, giving as reason the desire to have a sibling for the first child. Over the course of the program, two parents under 20 became pregnant and two others gave birth. For the seven parents over the age of twenty the picture was mixed. Of four single parents over 20, two hoped to have additional children. Of the three remaining married parents over 20, one with three children did not anticipate other children, while one married parent became pregnant and another gave birth during the program.

Reasons for Enrollment - Ninety-four percent (16) parents enrolled because they hoped the program would benefit their children ("too attached to Mommy", "can play with other children," "will prepare her for school") or because it gave the parents a chance to interact with other adults ("We both need to get out of the house," "I can talk to other people.") While one parent mentioned getting credits toward high school completion as the primary reason for enrollment, six of the 17 mentioned it as a secondary reason.

Reasons for Dropping Out of School - Thirteen parents (76%) had dropped out of school by grade ten, while four of the group dropped out in the last year of secondary school, with less than ten credits to complete. Table 1 summarizes parent responses, giving three possible primary reasons for dropping out of school. No parent gave school's failure to meet needs as an explanation. Reference to attitude included descriptors like "rebellious," "lazy," and "bad attitude."

Table 1
Parental School Leaving by Grade and Reasons

Grade	Pregnancy	Work	Attitude
By Grade 10	8	2	3
In Grade 12	1	3	

Recollection of childhood family reading - Eleven parents indicated that, as children themselves, they were read to rarely or not at all. One parent recalled that the only reading shared with parents was on Christmas Eve. The remaining six parents had pleasant preschool recollections of parent-child reading of favorite stories.

RESULTS

Attendance in Program

While transportation to school did not appear to present obstacles affecting attendance, child illness was the most frequent reason for non-attendance. Four levels of attendance were recorded for parents as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Parent Attendance in Family Learning Program

Less Than 50%	50% - 75%	75% or More	Dropped Out*
2	6	7	2

* Dropped out after three months.

Family Literacy Development

Three aspects of parent-child reading at home were of interest: parent estimation of the amount of current family reading, parent reading comfort level, and parent reading skill. Parent reading skill was assessed informally, based on parent ability to read independently children's books like, Three Billy Goats Gruff with 90% accuracy. This assessment was carried out through unobstrusive observation, when parents role played during read alouds or group reading circle. All but two parents were able

to meet this criterion. Reading errors of the latter two parents were characterized by miscues such as omissions of words, guesses which were phonetic approximations, long pauses before certain words, and limited use of inflection.

Tables 3 and 4 summarize ratings on amount of home reading and perceptions of comfort in parent-child shared reading on entry and at the end of the program.

Table 3

Amount of Parent-Child Reading at Home at Entry/End of Program Participation

None or Rare	Some (monthly)	Frequent (3x/wk.)	Daily
8 / / 0	8 / / 4	1 / / 10	0 / / 1

Table 4 indicates that half of the parents who did some or no shared reading with their children at home (16), offered explanations which focused on their children as too distractible, naughty, or young to be capable of shared reading at parent expectations for quiet reading. These parents described their frustrating attempts at quiet, shared reading, usually ending with threats of timeout because the children "wouldn't sit still."

Table 4

Parent Perceptions of Comfort in Parent-Child Shared Reading at Home at Entry/End of Program Participation

Parent Discomfort	Child Discomfort	Neutral	Enjoyable
1 / / 0	9 / / 0	5 / / 0	2 / / 15

The group of five parents identified as "neutral" on entry had positive perceptions of the importance of helping the young child to develop positive reading habits at home, and did not offer negative expressions related to home reading. Nevertheless, they tended to do shared reading infrequently. One married parent with three children noted that her youngest, a toddler was rarely read to while the older children had. This mother felt there was usually no time for shared reading, although she had enjoyed it with her older children. Both the neutral and child discomfort groups tended to see parental responsibility as one of providing reading materials for the child, where reading was considered a solitary activity for the child, keeping the child busy or quiet.

Over the course of the program, as children were read to daily in school and parents acquired facility with a range of children's literature through peer practice and discussions on what appealed to the children and how various parent reading strategies worked, parent journals documented that an increase in parent-child shared reading took place at home.

One parent stated on entry that she "hated" reading herself and did not like doing so with her child. This parent had no difficulty with any of the children's literature and noted at the end of the program that she still "hated" reading, but now regularly engaged in shared reading with her daughter at home, because her daughter loved it and initiated it. This parent also expressed that, "It's very important that she grows up with a love for reading."

Following Goldsmith and Handel (1990), parents learned a variety of parent reading strategies as they became familiar with a wider range of children's literature. Strategies included parent use of questions for prediction, relating content to familiar experience, using pictures for context clues, using inflection. Parent journals illustrated use of these strategies in reading to their children at home. An example of a parent encouraging story making from pictures:

> "Jimmy and I read <u>Where the Wild Things Are</u> and he thought it was a real cool book. I think he really enjoyed the pictures of the characters in the book. I also like the pictures in the book. He began reading the book by telling me a story just by looking at the pictures. He even knows the one that looked like a chicken. I like when he reads to me. I know he is using his imagination and makes up his own stories just by simple pictures.

Another change in home literacy practice was associated with choice of parent-child reading material at home. On entry 65% of parents (11) reported that they chose reading materials based on the child's interest in TV (Barney, Sesame Street). Seven parents noted literature such as nursery rhymes, Dr. Seuss, and alphabet picture books in addition to familiar TV characters. By the end of the program all parents voluntarily had signed out an average of three additional books from the family learning program library. Over the course of the program, as all of the children made more play choices that included books, they often requested that their parents take certain books home for shared reading.

Parenting Styles and Strategies

Parenting Frustration - At entry, 64.7% of parents (11) expressed that they experienced frequent (daily) frustration managing parenting, with two married parents included in this group. The remaining six parents expressed little or no frustration with parenting. The primary parenting concern expressed by 82% of frustrated parents (9) was general discipline, related to not listening or not obeying. Two parents cited concerns only about toilet training for their two and a half year olds. At the end of the program three parents continued to express frequent frustration with parenting on a daily basis.

An example of parenting frustration came from one parent journal:

> "Well, today started off again after Lucy's breakfast. She wouldn't stay downstairs to play again, every single day - cry, cry, cry. Lucy has a routine to follow everyone in the house does and shouldn't be broken by a 2 year old. I love my daughter so much - but I just can't stand hearing cry, cry for so long."

Another parent wrote:

> "I wonder how I can handle Amy's (age two and a half) defiant attitude. If I say no, don't touch, she has to try again always with a smirk on her face. Sometimes it makes me so mad I scream at her to stop, and she looks at me like I'm crazy. Sometimes I think this will never end. It really wears me down, and I wonder how much patience I'll have when the next one is born.

Parenting Strategies - At entry 70.5% of parents (12) tended to rely on two parenting strategies - stating limits and timeout.

Other strategies mentioned in this group were establishing routines, spanking, and withdrawal of privileges. Five parents identified praise and establishing routines as their primary strategies, with four parents in this latter group experiencing little or no frustration in parenting. At the end of the program, most parents (80%) identified establishing routines, offering limited choice, and establishing a reward system as effective strategies being used.

An example of the process by which parents discussed and tried parenting strategies is offered in parent journals. One parent noted:

> "The suggestion circle I very much appreciated. I already tried a few of the things but as Nancy (another parent) suggested putting most of the toys away for a while then taking them out a little at a time sounds like a very good idea I will try anything.

Another parent wrote:

> "Reading over Oct 12th entry, I've been noticing a big improvement with myself. I've really been trying to see myself getting angry or frustrated before I lose my temper. At the time it's happening I've tried reading or coloring with her. She cheers up if she's whiney and I usually end up laughing over something she's said or done. I guess what I'm doing is turning a negative into a positive experience."

Another parent:

> "Yesterday I finished making Jimmy's chart for at home containing things like if he brushes his teeth twice a day he can get a star and if he puts his toys away he can get a star and so far for Thursday he has received four but I will see what happens for the rest of the week."

Parent-Child Conversation - Because parent-child interaction was considered the basis for both literacy development and effective parenting, aspects of parent conversational style were observed during parent-child play in the first three weeks of the program. Three aspects were rated by teacher and program researcher for frequency (none, some, frequent): asking questions, labeling play for the child, using concept and action words, relating play experience to other familiar family experiences.

On entry, there was a group of ten parents (Group A) who maintained minimal interaction with their children during playtime, who did not participate in their children's play or join in with their children during daily "Circle Time." With the exception of one married parent, all were single, with seven single parents under the age of 20.

At the same time, there was a group of seven parents (Group B) who came into the program, actively engaged with their children during play, at least some of the time. Table 5 contrasts these two groups with respect to parent-child playtime conversation.

Table 5

Mean Rating* of Parent Conversation Style by Group During Playtime at Entry/End of Program

Group	Asks Questions	Labels Play	Relates Experience
A N=10	1 / / 2.1 (SD=.7)	1 / 2.1 (SD=.7)	1 / / 2.1 (SD=.7)
B N=7	2.7 (SD=.45) /3	2.7(SD=.45) /3	2.7(SD=.45) /3

* Ratings: 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often

One parent who initially appeared shy and had little verbal interaction with her child noted in her journal:

> "I am going to try to spend more time with Rhonda. I would like to make up more things Rhonda can do indoors because the winter weather is coming."

Later, as this parent took craft activities home:

> Rhonda really loved playing with the felt board and the felt animals. We took turns making a story about old mac donald's farm. She wanted to do it again before going to sleep.

Adult Development

While parents had returned to the secondary school setting with their children, at entry none of them had identified achieving graduation as a goal. Number of years away from school ranged from two to 15 years (M = 7, SD = 4.45). Most expressed discomfort about being in a school after being away for years, and needed to be reassured during enrollment that the program would not require tests or traditional homework. Only one parent expressed interest in receiving school credit as the reason for enrolling. Nevertheless, six parents had considered the opportunity to gain credit as an added advantage of the program.

Continuing Education - Academic guidance and career counselling were made available to parents as part of the program. Six parents took additional credits, while being enrolled in the program. Five of these had overestimated the number of credits they thought they would need in order to graduate. One parent expressed a career goal to be an accountant and identified related math courses she might need. However, she considered that the goal of secondary school graduation was at least three years away. None of these parents had a focus for taking courses, other than the courses were recommended by the guidance counsellor. By the end of the program all six expressed the desire to complete secondary school and considered it attainable.

Sixty percent (9) of the exit group (15) continued to be enrolled in the term following the end of their family literacy program, including five of the parents who had initially enrolled for additional concurrent credits. Two of the latter parents had plans to graduate by June, 1994. One of this pair had developed a career interest as a daycare worker, with plans to enroll in community college. The parent with interest in accounting revised her goals toward bookkeeping, with plans to enroll in community college.

The necessities of childrearing appeared to be uppermost in planning for the future, among those who continued to be enrolled in school after the family program ended, as illustrated in one married parent's journal entries:

> "Sometimes I find it difficult to go to school for 12:30 and then I arrive home when everyone else does. So it's very hecktic, then there is supper, help them with their homework, wash and bed. Then there is finally time for me. I guess my solution would be to not try and do so much. Once I get into a routine I know I'll do okay."

> "On Sunday Cindi and I went for a sleigh ride. I am thinking when Cindi gets into school I would like to find a job fulltime. But for now I'd like to get my grade 12 Diploma and I'll work from there."

Among the six parents who did not continue their education after participation in the family literacy program, two had either become pregnant or given birth. Four of the remaining parents gave changes in their family situations, such as moving, loss of a love relationship, child illness as reasons for not continuing to be enrolled.

CONCLUSION

Results indicated that participation in the family literacy program positively affected the ways in which most of the enrolled parents engaged in shared reading activities at home. In addition, after years away from school, half of the parents continued to be enrolled with plans to complete secondary school. Results suggested that a program which combined a family literacy and parenting involved parents in reflection about their parenting styles. Nevertheless, while parents appeared to adopt a wider range of parenting strategies during the program, there was no evidence that parents continued to use these strategies at home after the program ended.

Further research is needed with larger numbers of adults, as well as on a longitudinal basis to more fully evaluate the effects of the program on home literacy practice, parenting styles, and academic attainment. While enrolled children were not the focus of the present study, further research would provide evidence of the impact of the program on their school performance.

The family literacy program proved to be a different school experience for many of the participating parents who noted that they felt at ease and confident compared to their remembrance of earlier school days. An area for future research is change in self concept and self-esteem which may be associated with participation in such programs.

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